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ABSTRACT

The discussion looks at techniques for communicating effectively with students of English for academic purposes during classroom revision of written compositions. The approach highlighted is to use a word processor projected in the classroom that "sideshadows" comments to the original text. The original text is left untouched while projected in front of the class, and a new text is typed alongside the original during classroom discussion while the original is probed for ideas, structures, and meanings that can be enhanced or expanded upon. A sample text is used for illustration of the classroom process. (Contains 6 references.) (MSE)

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Direct Teacher Response through Computer-assisted Modeling:

The Example of Introducing Academic Discourse

We know from experience and from the literature that teachers' written responses on student papers are not as effective as we would like in prompting global revision. We stay up late at night conscientiously marking papers using the most recommended techniques, and we vary how we respond by using electronic and audio feedback, but all these means are flawed, I think, in that they are indirect. They are indirect in that we are only *talking about* writing because the student text is static, immobile. We can't easily get into the text with the student, so much that could be shown of the layered and complicated process of revisioning, isn't. As a result it usually takes several rounds of this indirect response before students' vision of writing broadens. As Dana Ferris and John S. Hedgcock (1998) point out, although there are better and worse ways to write responses, students often misunderstand written comments, see only a limited version of what we hope to communicate, and often cope by ignoring them. For more on this problem, there is a comprehensive literature review and bibliography [redacted] in Ron Ellis's 1994 *The Study of Second Language Acquisition.*

To reduce the shortcomings of indirect response we can bring into the public forum of the classroom the usually private complex wrestling that goes into revision. We already do this in many ways, and I would just like to contribute to our repertory on this a combination of techniques that is working pretty well for me. To reduce, for example, the time it takes for students to see beyond a simplistic five-paragraph frame of reference, to try more discursive

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writing, and to recognize and manage the inner debate of multiple voices competing for the pen, it is important to bring vital global issues of revision into the classroom very early. I do this in a live version of "sideshadowing" using a word processor projected overhead in the classroom, as you see here and discussing and modeling revision of a text. Sideshadowing is a technique related to double-entry journaling that can, as Nancy Welch (1998, pp. 374-395) explains, help a student hear the multiple voices competing to enter a composition. Mikhail Bakhtin, Welch says, saw novelists' view of the outcome of a novel as limited by a standardized ideal that silenced other possible outcomes or directions a text could take and that this happens in our students' texts, too. Welch reminds us that the "postmodern text is multi-voiced and populated with contradictory desires and emotions and is constructed through competing discourses." She sees Bakhtin's view of the possibility of an undetermined future of a text as a "challenge to what remains our most fundamental and unexamined assumption about roles in the writing classroom: the student is the writer, the teacher the reader; the student composes and the teacher comments." She describes sideshadowing as a technique that can open students' negotiation of conflicting voices, raise their awareness of various potential outcomes for a paper, and empower selection and composition of an outcome.

To show you how I might demonstrate this concept to students, I've selected a draft written by a university freshman very early in the semester of a recent EAP composition course. She is majoring in computer science per the advice of her parents although her interests lie elsewhere as you will see. She represents the group of young writers new to the university and to an English-speaking culture, just the group for whom we hope to assist entrance into the discourse community of the university and that of their selected majors, too. Her text was written in response to a short reading about the delicate balance of responsibility for learning that takes

place between teacher and student. I chose this student text because it's short but representative of longer papers, and it has short, clear examples of the characteristics I'd like to discuss. I usually use the student's disk, project the text overhead from a word processor and video projector as you see here, "Save As" to leave her original document untouched, acknowledge her permission to use her paper, thank her for participating, make clarifications that we will try to stay true to and try to help her articulate her ongoing thinking, format the text so everyone can read the overhead, and then I start by reading the whole text:

> Many teenages don't study. They don't know the knowledged is important for people. They are lazy in study and work. So they give up the chance of learn. Then when they old, they understand that how important study is, but that is too late to understant. Life are learn and chooise. What life you want that is handle by yourself. I remember my teacher told me that the success make from more and more hard works. If you have dream to be a doctor or a lawyer, you should spend lot of time and work very hard. If you are lazy, you will get nothing.

This is typical early-in-the-semester freshman writing in its simple message, simple structures, and lack of development or complication, and like many early pieces, it indicates a poor reading of the prompt in that it seems to have missed or ignored its subtle complications about who should take responsibility for learning and to what degree. We know conventional papers like this are par for early work, and we usually model or mark for error and transition and suggest the inclusion of an example. With this sort of conventional response, students learn to write conventional material more fluently, but learn virtually nothing about what discourse is, how to contribute to it, or how to consciously decide to enter true discourse by resisting conventional wisdom.

This student's advice, that to achieve your dream you have to work hard, might even be revised to go on for several pages by expressing the same thing in different ways and through examples, but would it really be a contribution to discourse about career choice? Like Bakhtin's insight into the conventional, predetermined future of novels, David Bartholomae, in *Inventing the university*, (1985, pp. 589-619) suggests that an idea like this one, like "work hard and you'll be successful" is a "commonplace," that is, a "culturally or institutionally authorized concept or statement." To the student it seems like thinking, and when it's printed, it looks like thinking. And it's seductive because it's safe; it's an idea that few would argue. At least this student attributes the admonition to hard work to someone else, a teacher, but the "teacher" as the source of advice is in itself a safe commonplace. The student's structure even approaches accuracy in most of this text because it's all been heard and said before in her own language as well as in English. It's as if she's taking dictation. Most second-language composition students begin with heavy reliance on commonplaces like this because, according to Bartholomae (p. 592), these simplistic ideas "provide points of reference and a set of 'prearticulated' explanations that are readily available to organize and interpret experience." These points of reference, he acknowledges, help anchor students in their difficult task of appropriating a discourse, that is learning the specialized language and conventions of a discipline and ways of working with them but asserts that we want to help them envision the goal of moving beyond this stage to making the deliberate intellectual move to problematize and in that to construct new knowledge.

In *Common Ground*, Kurt Spellmeyer (1993, pp. 67-92) suggests as fundamental to teaching writing Michel Foucault's sense of the "nature of knowledge . . . as an activity rather than a body of information" and "[a game] of truth." According to Spellmeyer, Foucault, in a interview subsequently entitled "The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom" (1988),

"suggests that the activities we call knowledge involve more than compliance with rules or conventions. To play a game of truth we must also devise strategies for 'problematization,' for changing the rules as we go along," and that "there is always a possibility, in a given game of truth, to discover something else and to more or less change such and such a rule and sometimes even the totality of the game. . . ." or to put it in Bahktin's terms, to re-envision the future of a paper as different from the standard. If in talking about hard work and success my student is entering a "game," then at least two of the rules of this game are to first make the claim that it takes hard work to succeed and then to support this claim with examples that demonstrate it's presumed 'truth'. And our students can write that paper; they can play that game. But whose voice is speaking in that paper? Foucault calls it the voice of "Institution," the voice of authority, the voice so dominant in many people's minds. There is little here of the voice of the student who has probably experienced something that has caused her to question the truth of this claim or to think it's not so simple. The student may, at some level, "think differently" about hard work and success, but what is she to do with these thoughts when the rules, when the standard claim, is so forceful? Foucault claims, according to Spellmeyer that "the history of knowledge [is] a series of discontinuities or redirections. Players in a game of truth—players, as opposed to powerless spectators—participate by learning to 'think differently,' by repeatedly seeking a position 'outside' the existing confines of the game." He claims this outside position can be found in experience. For example, if somewhere within the student there is evidence from her personal experience or observations of life that contradict or complicate this simplistic rule that hard work results in success, Foucault proposes that the student's voice, her "speaking 'I,' is nothing less than the [desired] source of problematization, the source of those questions that make knowledge something more than an endless repetition of unchanging paradigms and practices." He claims

that when "formal knowledge" is "subjected . . . to the risk of [life] experience, especially those aspects of it that tradition [has] glossed over or suppressed" that formal knowledge is "unveiled" and realities long concealed are revealed." Spellmeyer claims that because of "the leap—from the inside of conventional knowledge to an unknown outside," through 'uncertainty' . . . that we cannot 'teach' writing at all [but that we] can show students what writing is . . . if we allow them discontinuity [to think differently], for it is that from discontinuity that new knowledge is created."

My goal early in the semester is to help students identify and distinguish "formal knowledge" as Spellmeyer calls it, or "commonplace" as David Bartholomea calls it, or a predetermined future as Bakhtin calls it, from their own uncertainty and contradictory thoughts about it that are rooted in their own experience and observation, and to find in that uncertainty ways to problematize assumed truth. Spellmeyer suggests that this has everything to do with introducing students to a discourse community because to contribute to discourse, one participates by questioning the old in the quest for new paradigms and new truths, not by submitting passively to the conventions of an unchanging body of assumed knowledge, to the rules of the game.

Bartholomae suggests that somewhere in most formulaic student writing like this student's lies a moment of this voice that counters institution, of what Foucault calls the student's "I," a moment which Spellmeyer characterizes as a break in convention where the student "hesitates" and hints at resistance to Institution. The place in this text where there is hesitation, where the student herself may be speaking, I think, is: "Life are learn and chooise. What life you want that is handle by yourself." The thinking here isn't profound or developed either, and it still sounds like patent advice, but it does seem to be more in the student's own

voice rather than a cultural script for two reasons: its structure is more troubled than in other parts of the text, and there is the promise of complication in the dense grouping of "life," "learn," "choose," and "handle by yourself." Dense groupings of concept words in a troubled structure are often a good sign of relationships among concepts that a student may feel inadequate to express in English or may have silenced for other reasons.

A student's own voice, her own analysis, is often more troubled because she is doing just what we hope: she is working to express her own meaning by designing a unique structure for it. So it is in just these spots when students seem to have something of their own to say, while not completely knowing quite what they want to say, and when they try to design their own structures for it that it can be most helpful for us to intervene with support for the sake of teaching both discourse and structure. We usually see global and local revision as two separate stages in the writing process, but we also know it's more complicated than that, that in the local revision of a word or form, layers of meaning can be revealed that can redirect a paper globally. Roger Sale (1970, p. 73) in his classic *On writing* explains that precision of meaning and even direction for global organization is rooted in the relationship of one word to another:

> Anyone who gets in the habit of asking himself how he really wants to relate two words, phrases clauses, and sentences will find himself inevitably asking how to build groups of sentences into paragraphs and paragraphs into whole papers. But if you start thinking about organization as a matter that requires outlining and a large framework before beginning, you may end up with a wonderful paper, or you may end up with a paper that bears the same relation to its ideal fulfillment as a cartoon drawing does to a man. The life of any writer is expressed in his sense of small, moment-to-moment relationships, nerve, sinew, muscle. It is easy to

learn to make outlines, but much harder and more interesting to learn to write with the mind never leaving the page.

The details of the student's structure here, "Life are learn and chooise. What life you want that is handle by yourself," may indicate what Spellmeyer called "uncertainty" because in "life are learn and chooise" the relationship between learning and choosing is merely "and," nothing more clarifying while more is implied. And the two sentences seem closely related, but there is no clear statement of that relationship. In the second sentence, the choice, apparently reworded as "what life you want," is related to "handle by yourself" only by the attempted but ineffectual and inaccurate conjunction "that is." We teachers often guess meaning when it seems obvious; and we might assume a standard or Institutional meaning and guess she means that to choose the life you want, you have to take responsibility for it and take control of your own life—you have to "handle by yourself." That seems easy enough, and if we voice this, the student would probably agree, but by doing that we may be recasting what could be valuable problematization back into the voice of Institution.

Once I locate something like this that seems to be an uncertainty, I say something to help the student distinguish it and extricate it from the commonplace material that usually surrounds it. Then I engage the student in conversation as a kind of archeologist, as Foucault might say, of the details of words and the relationships among them, as Sale might say, in order to excavate any "position from the outside" the student may be negotiating. I might say while I highlight the passage overhead:

I see here well known advice about hard work, and I imagine you have experienced the necessity of hard work, but I sense from these two sentences that you may have

something personal and more complex to say about life and learning and choosing and working hard. Can you talk more about what you want to say here?

The student often answers with a spoken text that closely parallels the written one:

I mean life is you have to learn many things and then choose what do you want to study and work. And if you want choose a career, you have to handle by yourself.

I type what the student says being careful to respect her precise wording and allowing her time to compose mentally, then position her words next to the written text so she and the class can compare them. The pace of this process is slow, the pace the student sets by her need for time to think. It seems at first the student has virtually repeated what she wrote, but she has done more, and most will. The text has been opened for reconsideration of meaning, and too, I think, the movement back and forth from speech to writing facilitates the building of different structures because different habits and mechanisms are evoked in each. And by the way, this technique can work for both those who have a meta-knowledge of grammar and for those who don't. I make little judgments and adjustments all along to accommodate what knowledge they have as well as to enhance it.

Anyway, she has now expressed relationships among ideas that are not present but only implied in the written text. Now "life" is connected to "learn" by "have to" and "then" instead of just the word "is," and now she has specified that study or work is what is chosen. The student has also verbalized the relationship of "choosing" to "life" and "learning" with the word "if": "If you want to choose a career, you have to handle by yourself." Finally, she has articulated that the relationship between "what life you want" and "handle by yourself" is "if." "If" you choose a career or the life you want, you have to handle by yourself." And an odd and important feature is that 'if' and 'but" join these two sentences that wouldn't be joined by "but" to express the

assumed meaning of "first you choose, then you work hard." I suspect a suppressed complication, but it's not for me to guess at. I try to help the student excavate her own complication, so I begin by saying:

> I see. That helps because you've explained that you "have to" learn and "then" choose a career. And that "if" you want the life you would choose, you "have to" handle it by yourself. To revise these sentences to show these relationships we might write:

And I type:

> In life you have to learn many things and you have to choose a career, but if you want to live the life you choose, you have to handle it by yourself.

Notice how structure can be taught in context and as a servant to meaning, not as the central focus. For example I've added "it" after "handle" to model structure, the sort of detail most students do notice. I say, "How's this?" and the student says that yes, she meant this. I say:

> I wonder, though, about your connection between learning and choosing. You use "and" to connect them, but is your idea really that learning "prepares" you to make choices by informing you about what choices are available?

The student answers:

> Yes learning many things prepares to choose a career. The "and" is really "prepare."

The students are experiencing together the negotiation of form and meaning. I say:

> OK. Saying "prepare" is a good way to connect learning to choosing. Let's revise it. And watch what else changes when I use prepare:

I type and talk aloud:

> In life you have to learn many things that will prepare you to choose a career, but if you want to live the life you choose, you have to handle it by yourself.

I say:

> Notice that now instead of "and" I use "that will prepare" because it makes a clearer connection between learning and choosing. Now, my next question is this: By the word "learning" do you mean just academic learning or would you include other learning such as learning about people, how life works, and things you learn just by living, not necessarily in school?

The student responds:

> I meant school learning, but I think now that life learning helps you make a career choice, too. And I want to add that.

This revisioning is fine. The original intended meaning will certainly shift as collaboration and more thinking takes place. The fact that meaning changes by the barest alteration of a word or form and by the barest suggestion is not something for us as teachers to fear because we don't want to appropriate student text, rather it's part of the very nature of language that through this kind of work students become more aware of and can gradually learn to manage in English. I say, "OK. Let's revise again to show these details." I type:

> You have to learn many things in school and in other parts of life that can prepare you to choose a career, but if you want to live the life you choose, you have to handle it by yourself.

I haven't heard it yet, but I'm still hoping to find the student's fragment of conflict with the institutional dictate to "work hard." Students are seeing how through attention to details of word and form meaning can unfold, so now that we're engaged and the student seems comfortable, and our system of collaboration is understood running smoothly, I ask a bigger question. And at

this point in the reported dialogue, I will express the student's words in native English to save us time, for her structure is not so much the point. I say:

> By talking about "choosing" and "living the life you choose" and "handling it by yourself" all together, you have made me wonder if you think choosing a career is more complicated than just working hard.

The student says:

> Many times parents also choose.

I say:

> So choosing can be complicated. You have to consider lots of things when you choose, especially your parents. You can't just choose the major you want. Is that why you have a "but" to connect the two sentences? I sense from the word "but" a hesitation from you and a lot of complicated ideas that you haven't expressed.

The student says:

> Yes, I just put "but." I don't know how to write it all. It's hard work to study my parent's choice of major, but if I make my own choice, it's harder; I have to handle it by myself. But their choice is harder too because I don't like it."

The complication is emerging, and as Spellmeyer and Foucault predicted, it is personal. We don't want to pressure the student to discuss something she is uncomfortable with, but it is in this personal material that she is taking the risk of, as Spellmeyer says, "subject[ing] formal knowledge to life experience which transposes it into the context of day by day life which unveils realities long concealed" (70). The realities of hard work that have been concealed in this student's writing, of course, have to do with the dilemma of making a choosing an academic major, the dilemma that in either choice is pain. I say:

> This sounds like something really important to write about. It adds a deeper level or a complication to your paper about learning and choosing a career and having to work hard. The complication is that there may be no right choice and not so easily prescribed road to success after all.

It is easier to introduce the concepts and vocabulary of discourse such as "complication" fairly easily when what they mean is fairly evident by the context of this conversation and student text. I say:

> Please tell me more about all you're thinking when you say, "handle it by yourself."

The student is silent for awhile then she says:

> In my case, I would have to get better grades and prove something if I were to choose another major than my parents' choice. Or you might have to support yourself. Or maybe your parents won't talk to you or be proud of you. Or your father might think you don't care about him and then have a heart attack and die.

I ask: "have you seen these things?" She answers: "Yes." Other students are nodding and saying yes, and starting to tell stories. I let them talk. Now they are in true discourse about career choice because they are discussing its complications, not parroting platitudes.

In her expression of the complication, the student switches person from "I" to "you," from first person to second person. This switch indicates, I have found, the student's wondering how to incorporate personal material, a smart writing question. It also indicates the ability to generalize, to theorize about experience, a smart writing skill. And these are things I can more easily teach now that they have been opened in the context of a real idea and a real paper, but I don't choose to mention them now because we are just getting to the student's voice, and we

don't want to bury it again under dictates of style conventions. Another time. So, when it's time to return to the text, I say:

> So when you first wrote, 'What life you want that is handle by yourself' there was a whole lot you were thinking. I'm curious, why didn't you write about those things?

She answers:

> I feel confused about how to make an introduction when I write things like that. But the main problem is I don't know the conclusion. And I don't know if the teacher will want that. I probably will get a low grade. I can't write it because I have to get good grades."

These are more smart questions about writing that we can collect and come back to at a later stage in the process. I say:

> These are all things I can help you learn how to do. There are lots of things stopping you. What else is stopping you?

She answers:

> I was supposed to write about the reading. The reading was about whom is responsible for learning, but this is about whom is responsible for choosing what to learn.

I answer:

> Sometimes it's OK to let a reading take you into something that's more your own thinking, and I can show you this in this course. So, anyway, who is responsible for choosing, do you think?

She says:

> It depends on many things and there is no good choice. I have to explain a lot of things, and I'm not sure how. I get confused when I try to think about all those things. No matter what, there's always hard work, so I can say that.

Here are even more insightful questions about writing. If we do draw attention to these things as asides, as things to work on in throughout the course, we've collected together a semester's worth of important agenda. Her original text doesn't reveal this complex awareness of writing. She must have silenced these concerns because they were overwhelming and because so much was a stake and just written the safe, conventional thing. Since these are precisely the questions the course is designed to address, it's important to have them coming from the students themselves so they feel involved in their resolution. I go back to the text:

But hard work is not really what you want to talk about."

She says:

That's right. It's that there's no good choice.

I respond:

What else is stopping you from writing about what you're really thinking about?

She answers:

I shouldn't write about my parents and complain. They do everything for me.

Other students are nodding. I wonder aloud:

Could you write it in a way that shows respect for what they're doing and feeling but also tells what you're feeling?

She answers:

Maybe. I don't know. I don't know how.

I say:

That's another thing we can work on in this course.

Now we are really hearing what the student has to say about choosing a career, and we're even hearing why students write as they do and what their questions and worries are about

writing. This student has made the choice to speak for Institution just like she has made the choice to major in what her parents chose, and in her draft she negotiated conflicting voices and lost to convention, but we have been able to regain that loss, re-envision the paper, and even build a vision for our course. She has even articulated quite insightfully the writing skills necessary for writing the problematized paper, and given me the opportunity to offer help through the course.

I say:

> There will be times when it's important to write the unpopular and complicated truth. I see my job this semester as helping you learn how to write that more complicated paper that is within you. Then when you judge throughout your life when it is time to write those kinds of truths that people don't usually face and talk about, then you will know how to write about them.

I then either make an assignment if time is short or do a class activity. The public forum becomes a private one in which students are to try to find their own voices in their drafts like we found the student's voice in the two original sentences of her draft or if it's not in the draft, to find it within themselves. They are then to just write to me informally to tell me what they'd really like to say but aren't sure how. If they don't perceive a complication in their writing or thinking, they can talk about, based on personal knowledge, not what authorities say, how what they've said is their own thinking.

Some EAP teachers might argue that this work with diverse voices doesn't serve the goal preparing students for academic writing in that many genres of academic writing are considered "knowledge displays" or summaries. But I propose that to find your own voice in the cacophony of Institutional commonplaces, to explore what you really think, how to decide whether or not to

say what you think, and to learn appropriate ways to say what you think are at the very heart of writing in any genre and at the heart of true academic discourse. It is through these things that we can truly help students write themselves into a discourse community. And a practical technique for communicating an abstract concept about writing is to have it prove its own relevance by coming from the students themselves, and this can often be done by talking through student drafts made visible and manipulable by overhead projection of a word processor. And this is only one example of how this technique can make teacher response more direct and effective.

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